

**South Downtown Advisory Group
Meeting #6 September 15, 2005
Draft Meeting Notes**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Little Saigon:

1. Advisors agreed there is much potential for change and growth in this neighborhood.
2. Impacts to existing businesses are a concern. There is interest in financial or planning strategies to address those impacts.
3. The advisors were interested in what kinds of housing may work in this area. Advisors expressed interest in strategies (inclusionary zoning?) that would capture some of the value generated by taller denser development and direct it toward use for new affordable housing.
4. The maximum woodframe building limit of 85 feet and the minimum financial threshold for concrete buildings of 120 feet were described by a few advisors. Code revisions and zoning height limit choices will affect what can be built.
5. Parking is a significant issue that deserves a comprehensive strategy regarding how it is provided and managed.
6. An urban design strategy for parks and open space could be a key need in this area, that could aid in defining a future park/open space and development vision that the business community and community-at-large could buy into. Development standards for new buildings along key streets are also important.
7. Traffic congestion impacts are a key concern regarding potential development at the Goodwill site.

Chinatown Core:

1. Advisors generally agreed with the proposition that major zoning changes should be avoided in the central historic core of Chinatown due to sensitivities about historic character, existing businesses and residents.
2. Most input described challenges of rehabilitating existing structures, financial incentives for rehab projects, and the need for quality architectural design.
 - A. Parking, building code/life safety requirements and financing issues are key challenges
 - B. Examine different strategies for aiding rehab projects, including:
 - waivers of certain fees or infrastructure improvement costs;
 - allowing funds generated by new development to be applied to rehab projects (and affordable housing);
 - different ways of allowing transfers of development rights; and
 - tax credits.
 - C. It is important to insist on quality materials and compatible architectural design in new construction, to maintain character. Design elements such as floor-to-floor heights, window proportions, building scale and massing, and other details are important.
 - D. Some advisors indicated they did not want review processes to be any stricter than they currently are.

INTRODUCTION

Questions about the overall process included:

- How will findings and planning from this process be incorporated into a broader discussion of growth and development in other parts of Center City and other urban centers? For example, growth expectations in Broadway, South Lake Union, Northgate, and how these expectations might mutually affect each other and City's policy choices. Susan acknowledged the relevance of these as Center City and comprehensive planning topics. This planning effort will seek information about potential demand for development in the study area.
- What will be the commitment of funds and staffing to South Downtown-related in the 2006 budget, from all departments? (When that information is released, DPD will provide it to interested parties.)

Susan McLain introduced the zoning topic. Gordon Clowers provided a brief summary of advisors' input to date (assisted by a map).

SUB-AREAS ZONING DISCUSSION

Little Saigon

Susan led a discussion on four Little Saigon sub-areas: King and Weller Streets east of 12th Ave. S., the area west of 12th Ave. S. to I-5, Dearborn St. corridor, and Jackson St. corridor. Many of the advisors' comments apply to the whole Little Saigon vicinity or even more broadly.

King and Weller east of 12th Ave. S.

There is much potential for change

A compilation of advisors' comments suggests the following:

- This area has several of the study area's underutilized properties, and a trend toward change could occur quickly. Some owners are rumored to already be waiting for the opportunity to shift away from light industrial uses. The economic viability of the area to continue as an industrial center should therefore be analyzed and discussed.
- Look at this area in terms of how it reaches out to nearby growing neighborhoods, and Little Saigon's role as a nexus/connection point. Also, we should "think more nodally" in setting the zoning boundaries—meaning try to have a single zone covering a key area like 12th/Jackson, rather than multiple zones that mean something different for each block.

Business impacts

- One advisor suggested a business impact fund that would be established to help businesses that would be displaced by rezones and/or future development. This could be funded by impact fees, or a "TIF Lite" mechanism.
- Another advisor noted the possible impacts of future growth on the Dearborn Street corridor, which is a key freight mobility corridor. Look at this topic broadly in the city.

Housing

- Residential presence would be a plus, as long as businesses are not displaced. Factors favoring residential use include proximity to Downtown, views, transportation access.

- The advisors were interested in the type of housing that could occur. What would work: Senior housing? Mixed-use apartments? Condos? Oriented to moderate incomes? Workforce housing? Transit-oriented development?
- What is the overall demand for housing in the Center City, and how would our planning determine what's reasonable to plan for in South Downtown?
- Ensure that housing costs remain reasonable. Look at inclusionary zoning measures (capture some of the benefits gained through taller buildings). One advisor noted she is "looking for more than just baby steps, the City should be fairly aggressive" in strategy.

Input on zoning strategies

- The market will determine what can be built. Why not provide more flexibility in zoning that will allow for the movement of the market forces?
- Follow-up discussion about real estate markets indicated the following:
 - Approximately 85 feet is the maximum physical threshold for woodframe construction over a 3-story concrete base, while 120 feet is the approximate minimum financial feasibility threshold for a concrete building that will "pencil out." Developer advisors suggested that possible zoning changes should acknowledge these thresholds and provide for higher heights.
 - The building code, fire code and zoning code need to be integrated to allow that 85-foot maximum woodframe construction to actually occur to that level. Apparently there are discrepancies where these codes disagree as to the buildability of woodframe buildings to this height.
 - Higher heights would accommodate better design, such as higher ground-floor retail spaces. It also would aid in the financial feasibility of new buildings.
 - Be sure to include the financial effect of possible affordable housing charges into the analyses of feasibility.
 - One advisor noted, "don't be afraid of higher heights"
- Consider a pedestrian P zone to ensure good use patterns at street level.
- The area east of 12th Ave. S. is outside the special review district. Will Design Review provide enough protections and ability to have new development reflect community interests? If not, is there a need for an overlay zone that would give the community more say? Other advisors believed that Design Review guidelines could be specified for this area, and that specific street design requirements or plans would help in that regard.

Urban design strategy and supportive park/open space features

- Livable and sustainable features, and well-planned open spaces will be important too, particularly for family livability (reference to Portland Pearl District). Also, review opportunities for sidewalk-related amenities and pocket parks.
- Regarding the breakup of long blocks, the City could explore through-block pedestrian connections, perhaps lined with townhouses.
- Check out the open space ratios in the Comprehensive Plan for guidance on how much open space is needed. Consider contributions to an open space fund as a strategy (City's proposal for Downtown park impact fee noted).
- David Goldberg of Parks noted that there is a model of a more proactive approach in North Downtown park planning right now.
- Consider incentivizing the private sector to create parks.

- It was suggested that an urban design strategy, with key parcels or key locations identified (as done in Bellevue), would be beneficial in planning and implementing park/open space improvements. Likewise, perhaps it aids in defining the future vision in such a way that the business community and community-at-large could buy into.
- The various property owners in Little Saigon tend to be independent-minded, but some may be open to selling property.

Little Saigon, West of 12th Ave. S.

- **Noise and housing:** I-5 noise impacts on livability in this vicinity are important. However, advisors had divergent comments on what needs to occur. Locate housing in that near-freeway vicinity, or not. Continue to accommodate commercial uses, or encourage more of a housing-oriented area. Create a greenbelt as a buffer. Fix the freeway design, including one advisor's suggestion of I-5 lidding. It was noted that there already are many apartment buildings located near I-5 in First Hill and Capitol Hill.
- **Retail:** This could be a good area for pedestrian-oriented retail uses due to slower auto traffic, and outdoor retailing that already occurs.
- **Parking:**
 - "A lack of parking is this area's Achilles heel." Also, a lack of alleys probably causes garage entries to be designed at the front property line in many cases. This is a design issue and development feasibility issue for smaller lots.
 - Reducing or eliminating the parking requirement would be good for allowing expansion of existing buildings (this has been an issue with some existing businesses in the IC zone east of 12th). An advisor noted, "What's wrong with letting the market decide how much parking is needed?"
 - Need a balance in parking between "too little" and "too much." Need a comprehensive parking strategy to help aid development feasibility. Perhaps a garage or two in key locations, as occurs with the Pike Place Market and the Pacific Place garages.
 - Perhaps a transportation management association (TMA) would help deal with parking issues, as in Kirkland and Portland.
 - Perhaps a garage as a public/private partnership should be explored.

Dearborn Street Corridor

- Traffic congestion is a key concern with respect to the Goodwill site development. Congestion and additional impacts on the key route from North Beacon Hill (12th Avenue S. and Weller Street) is of concern.
- One advisor questions the need for "big box retail" use at this location, and the amount of parking and traffic that would occur. The residential use component was seen as positive.
- This Goodwill site is a "gateway" to Downtown and Little Saigon given its location on Rainier. The gateway nature should be emphasized as a design component. Also, a block street grid would be good to have on the site.
- One advisor asked what would happen to the property west of 12th currently in sloping vegetated area. Topography and ownership could be issues. Another advisor/property owner described possible commercial and multifamily development in that area.

Jackson Street Corridor

- An architect advisor noted that we should identify the "soul of the district and try to amplify that" and we should not preclude the "organic" type of growth and evolution that has led Little Saigon to its current condition. Look for the "signature identifiers" that should be emphasized. Also, consider concepts that might integrate green spaces with adjoining places for small business.
- On design matters, one advisor asked, "how will Jackson's major through-route nature be dealt with?" A later comment from a DPD planner proposed a concept to look at: consider height limits to support mainly retail uses along Jackson, with height limits stepped up in the rear portion of the vicinity, somewhat like in Vancouver B.C. An advisor noted that this would cut down on noise issues that are prevalent when apartments are placed along arterials.
- Further work should look at design factors such as transparency at street level, "build-to lines" that would define the streetscape realm better, perhaps guidelines that encourage uses to physically open up to the sidewalk (like a restaurant with façade that opens to allow blending of indoor and outdoor space).
- Existing parking lots may contribute to local traffic congestion on Jackson due to in-out movements, in contrast to the Chinatown core. For the future, the vacant or low-density developed lots actually do provide an opportunity for a different character, though.
- One advisor asked, "Is there a recognition among Little Saigon business owners that the strip mall character will eventually need to change?" The business representative advisor noted that business owners tend to have a realistic view but are not looking ahead very far into the future.

Chinatown Core

Gordon led a discussion about zoning in the Chinatown core. He first suggested that major zoning changes should be avoided in the heart of the Chinatown core due to sensitive historic and economic conditions and residential populations, and to avoid jeopardizing the National Register historic district designation. A number of advisors nodded in general agreement.

Subsequent input centered around the challenges of rehabilitating existing structures, what financially-supportive incentives are possible, and the need for quality architectural design.

Challenges of rehabilitating existing structures:

- One advisor said it will take more than just tax credits to make rehab projects work. He suggested talking about other discounts that could be provided or costs picked up by the City, including street fees and electrical facilities installation costs. The City should perceive it as incentivizing the owners to invest in improving their existing buildings.
- Parking is a key issue in that it is difficult to put into historic buildings—the City should look at shared parking arrangements and/or relaxing the parking requirements.
- Obtaining financing is a problem for rehab projects. Also, existing businesses are sensitive and often not able to afford future rents/costs in an improved building. These factors limit the financial capacity of the building owners to consider improvements.

- The "substantial alteration clause" that dictates bringing buildings up to building and life safety codes for many rehab projects. The City should improve consistency of those codes with the zoning code and make prudent changes.

What incentives are possible:

- There is a need to increase the availability of funds to the private sector to support rehab projects. The suggested funding method is to have new development pay into a fund that would then be available for a variety of purposes, including rehab-supportive incentives and housing provision.
- Two other advisors agreed with that funding approach, with housing the highest priority: allow for denser development that would generate more funds to be used to pay for affordable housing.
- Allow a wider variety of ways to sell development rights than available today.
- Historic tax credits

Historic character and quality design

- Regarding infill development in the historic core area, it is important to insist on quality materials and compatible architectural design in new construction, to maintain character. Design elements such as floor-to-floor heights, window proportions, building scale and massing, and other contextual details of the district's architecture are important.
- One advisor briefly challenged the need to make all newer buildings fit with a historic aesthetic, but without additional followup discussion.
- One advisor asked the group, can we agree that we don't need even stricter or more difficult regulations? This addressed both design review and special review districts.
- Another advisor indicated that in Portland, designers are forced to work a lot harder in the review processes, but it produces great buildings. Rather than being merely a matter of difficult processes, perhaps it is more about the "attitude" of the process that is conducted (e.g., to what purpose it is oriented).

PUBLIC COMMENTS

John Chaney noted:

- A location near the Victorian Row Apartments (a landmark east of 12th Ave. S. in Little Saigon) could be good for through-block access.
- Consider community-based funding for community parking, e.g., short-term parking that would support retail businesses.
- We should evaluate transfer of development rights strategies that will link provision of resources for the area's needs with opportunities that will arise with future development.
- Several elements of architectural design common to Chinatown should be incorporated by new development to ensure compatibility of new and historic structures. These include: floor-to-floor heights, proportions of windows, use of materials, building scale and massing and other contextual details. If these elements are specified in design standards, there would be greater predictability for designers and greater chances that new development would be compatible within the core.

Another commenter noted:

- The City should consider higher heights along Fifth Avenue on both sides, reflecting the scale already present at the Union Station office property.